

# Ivy House pub, Nunhead

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## Short description of the project

The Ivy House steering group came together in April 2012 when the closure of the pub was announced with only one weeks notice; locals were dismayed at the prospect of losing this beautiful wood panelled traditional public house. A steering group of five Nunhead residents formed a campaign to "Save the Ivy House" under that name.

A Grade II listing initiated by the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) was finalised just before the Ivy House closed which helped to save the interior from destruction. The primary aim was to keep the building in use as a pub, but it quickly became clear that this would mean acquiring the pub on behalf of the community. Ivy House Community Pub Limited was set up as a Community Benefit Society (a type of Industrial and Provident Society), as the vehicle to buy and manage the building on behalf of the community. The Ivy House had previously been sold by the brewery to a private developer, so there was a high risk of conversion to flats or retail space. However, *Save the Ivy House* succeeded in using the Localism Act to get it listed by Southwark Council as an Asset of Community Value - the first in the country - putting a 6 month moratorium on further sale, except to a community group.

The campaign group put together a business plan and were able to raise enough money to purchase the freehold with help from a loan from the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF) and a grant from the Social Investment Business Group. In March 2013 the sale was finalised. Five months of preparation followed to bring various aspects of the pub up to standard: fit new cellaring equipment and hire staff. A community share issue was also launched which gave locals the opportunity to get involved in the project and raised a further £142,000.

The Ivy House reopened in August 2013 and has enjoyed a successful first year, with solid trading, lots of support from the local community, and public recognition - two Heritage Angels awards from English Heritage, and Pub of the Year award from South East London CAMRA. The continuing aim is to keep the Ivy House at the heart of the community, and build a robust trading record ready for refinancing when the loan is repaid trading to AHF.

## What would have happened without this project?

Without this project, it is almost certain that the Ivy House would have been lost forever as a public house, due to the value of property in London. The building itself has a great deal of character, with most of the original features of a 1930s estate pub, including wood panelling and lead lighted stained glass. It is one of few remaining traditional pubs in the local area not to have been modernised. Moreover it has a rich cultural heritage; a red velvet and gold lamé draped stage in "the ballroom" was an important venue on the pub rock circuit and has been graced by

famous names such as Ian Dury, Elvis Costello, Joe Strummer and Dr Feelgood. In more recent years the pub has played an important role in the community, providing a music venue for local bands and a space for Nunhead residents to hold weddings, wakes, birthday parties and arts events; and importantly, it has persisted as an old fashioned pub where locals can prop up the bar and strike up a conversation over a pint.



The front of the Ivy House, Nunhead © Ewan Munro (Creative Commons licence)

## What has the project achieved, or difference has it made?

As a result of the project, Nunhead had retained an important local landmark, which has strong cultural significance and provides a strong community focus. The building is now owned "in trust" on behalf of the Nunhead neighbourhood (and the choice of organisation structure is asset locked, meaning the benefit remains with the local community).

The pub's interior has received some much needed care and attention and its authentic vintage feel continues to impress visitors and pick up wider recognition - it was recently used for location filming for a new film about the Kray twins.

A lively programme of events, much of it locally driven, is bedding in. Some features of the pub's previous eras, such as a regular Irish music session and Sunday afternoon big band jazz, have been reinstated, while others have arrived since the Ivy House reopened, including dance and yoga classes, a knitting circle and a monthly French music session. The ballroom and refectory are in huge demand for weddings and other hire events, with bookings already taken right through into 2015.

The Ivy House team are also working on regular community-focused initiatives such as affordable social lunches for the elderly, and providing a space to talk about men's mental health. Meanwhile, regulars who have used the pub for 30 years or more are in their usual seats at the bar.

The business provides two full time jobs and employs around 15 casual bar staff, and puts money back into the local economy by using local suppliers, in particular breweries from around London. Finally, the campaign and business pages on Facebook have well over 1,000 members!

### What were the main lessons learnt or challenges overcome?

One of the major challenges was completing the transaction to acquire the building, once funding was in place. The Localism Act mechanism prevented the new owner from selling the building on to another buyer, but made him very reluctant to deal with the campaign and negotiations were very protracted. *Save The Ivy House* were very fortunate to be able to progress funding discussions quickly, but six months did allow long to achieve this. The sheer amount of ongoing involvement for the steering group members has also been a challenge. While it has been very rewarding, it has taken a huge level of commitment, however seeing the pub open and buzzing with people after two years of work is worth the struggle.

### What is the future of the project?

The project is now at a stage where the pub has completed a year's trading and yjr first shareholders' AGM. With a much clearer idea of what to expect financially the pub is able to refine its plans.

The events programme is going from strength to strength and will continue to actively engage the local community, including a likely further shares issue. A major consideration is the reinstatement of the western half of the building, which was partitioned off and mothballed by previous owners in the 1980s. Historically it had a bar layout to match the present front bar, and would enable the venue to operate the various spaces, including the ballroom, much more flexibly.

As the organisation has matured it is beginning to take a more strategic role. It is seeking to expand the management committee to share responsibilities more widely and involve more shareholders.

The Ivy House have shared their experiences with a wide range of similar projects looking to save local pubs and other community assets, creating a "skills bank" which was part of the original project plan. The organisation is frequently asked to comment on the issue of pubs closing and community rescue bids in the local and national media.

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